FROM THE ROMAN TEMPLE TO THE BYZANTINE BASILICA AT CHHÎM (south Lebanon) [1]

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Byzantine churches in Lebanon – a long neglected legacy

Among the first Christian cult places in the Syro-Palestinian region mentioned in literary sources, is a church built in Tyre during the reign of Constantine the Great by the bishop Paulinus and described by Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* X, IV, 45). The monument was a lavishly decorated basilica of considerable size covered with marble and furnished with luxurious lamps and liturgical vessels. For some unknown reason, the church fell into oblivion sometime in late antiquity [2]. At the time Tyre was an important centre of ecclesiastical administration that exerted its power over the episcopal sees situated on the Mediterranean coast: Sidon, Berytus or Tripoli. The process of Christianization, previously limited to the cities, started to affect the rural areas. This process manifested itself in the transformation of local pagan sanctuaries into churches as well as with the establishment of newly founded places of worship.
Archaeology in the region and related scholarship has developed considerably in recent years, particularly regarding late antiquity. The presence of more than two hundred Byzantine churches in Palestine and one hundred and fifty in Transjordan indicates the level of dissemination of Christian communities during the course of barely three or four centuries[3]. Similar calculations should be made in the context of Syria, a larger and much more thoroughly Christianized area. The small group of only fifteen churches published so far from the coastal part of Lebanon reflects the inadequate state of exploration rather than the real density of ecclesiastic architecture. Possibly later intensive occupation of the land contributed to the disappearance of many of them [4].
We owe the discovery of the first Byzantine church in Lebanon to Ernest Renan who in 1861 exposed at Qabr Hiram near Tyre the remains of a basilica dedicated to St. Christopher [5]. Some of its mosaics, dated to 575 AD from a Greek inscription, can be seen at the Louvre. The plan of the church with its mosaics and liturgical installations represents one of the most important testimonies of late antique ecclesiastic architecture in the area.
As a result of the establishment of the Directorate General of Antiquities in Lebanon and the indefatigable activity of its long-term director, Emir Maurice Chéhab, a series of new discoveries were made. In 1958 and 1959 two volumes on the mosaic decoration were published shedding new light on the examples of Byzantine churches on the southern part of the Lebanese coast: Zahrani, 'Ain es-Samaké, Khalde, Choueifat [6]. Fifteen years later, two additional churches of great

Site	Date	Remarks	Reference
Zahrani	389/390 AD	Mosaic pavement of the northern aisle	Chéhab 1958-1959, p.104.
Chhîm	498 AD	Mosaic pavement / construction of a church (?)	Waliszewski, Tarazi *et al.* 2002.
Khan Khalde Upper Church	506 AD	Mosaic pavement of the southern annex	Duval and Caillet 1982.
Zahrani	524 AD	Mosaic pavement of the southern annex	Chéhab 1958-1959. p. 104-105.
Zahrani	535 AD	Mosaic pavement of the diaconicon	Chéhab 1958-1959, p. 105-106.
Zahrani	541 AD	Mosaic pavement of the narthex	Chéhab 1958-1959, p. 100.
Anâne	541 AD	Mosaic pavement of the church	Alpi, Kowalski and Waliszewski 1999.
Jiyeh	573 AD	Mosaic pavement of the baptistery	Contenau 1920, p. 302-304.
Qabr Hiram	575 AD	Mosaic pavement of the church	Renan 627-628, Duval 1977.
'Ain es-Samaké	580/581 AD	Mosaic pavement of the northern annex	Chéhab 1958-1959, p. 177; H. Seyrig, "*La date des mosaiques de 'Ain es-Samake*", *Syria*, 39, 1962 p. 42-44.
'Ain es-Samaké	604/605	Mosaic pavement of the portico	Chéhab 1958-1959, p. 176-177.
Khan Khalde Upper Church	608 AD	Mosaic pavement of the atrium	Duval and Caillet 1982.
Khan Khalde Upper Church	622 AD	Mosaic pavement of the southern aisle	Duval and Caillet 1982.

significance were uncovered by Lebanese archaeologist Roger Saidah at Khan Khalde – *Mutatio Heldua*, just a few kilometers south of Beirut. Due to his premature death the study was resumed by Noël Duval and Jean-Pierre Caillet who published a comprehensive report [7]. To conclude this phase of research on Lebanese churches, Pauline Donceel-Voûte published *Les pavements des églises byzantines de Syrie et du Liban*, which remains the most complete and up-to-date description of all identified remains [8]. The end of hostilities in the country at the beginning of the 1990s led to additional discoveries of Byzantine churches at Majdal Zoun, Tyre, ʻAnane and Chhîm some of which have been published [9].

Chhîm, gods of the ancestors and the God of the Christians

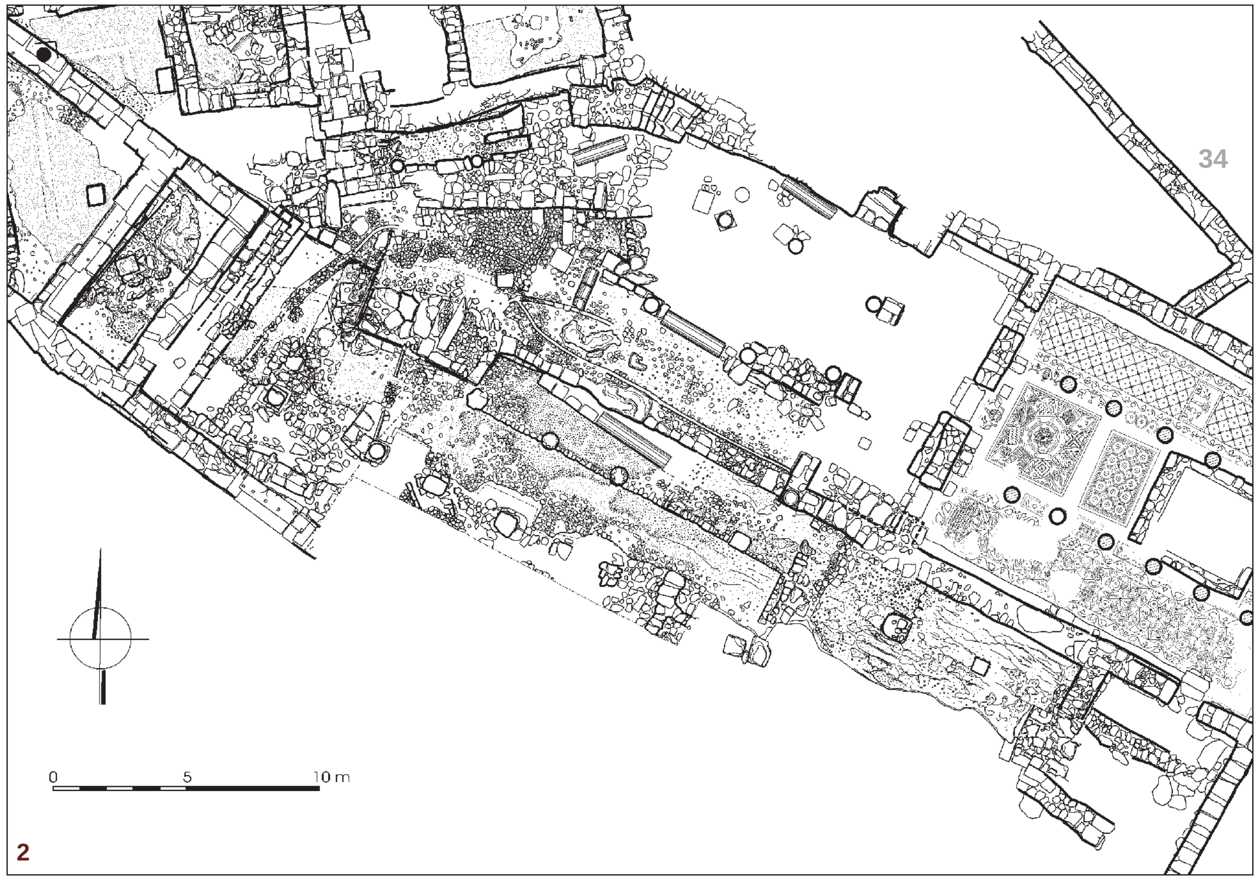
An interesting example of a small rural church was recently excavated in Chhîm in southern Lebanon [10]. The site itself, but also the church, present a number of interesting features corresponding with many unsolved problems.
Situated about 40 kilometers south of Beirut, the site of Chhîm lies on the slopes of a hill rising 500 meters above sea level. Its interest lies in the exceptional condition of its buildings that date from the Roman period and remain in use up to the Early Islamic period [11].
Although traces of occupation go back to the Bronze and Iron Age, the site should be considered primarily as a village from the Roman and Byzantine period. It was organized along a network of primary paved streets and secondary passages within which were laid out a series of simple houses and oil producing workshops. The production of olive oil at Chhîm seems to have been one of the primary sources of income for the inhabitants judging by the number of workshops located at the site, of which four have been excavated.
The place itself, as we discovered after nine seasons of excavations, attracted from very early on the attention of the local population and thusbecame one of the early rural cult sites of the Lebanese mountains. The cult found its material expression (at least for the period traced by the excavations) in the form of a small rectangular sanctuary built in the early Roman period on the terrace near the southeastern edge of the village.
Another change occurred in the middle of the 2nd century AD. The relative wealth and influence of a Greco-Roman culture encouraged the elders of the village or the whole community to erect a new temple, this time in accordance with the architectonical rules known from so many Roman sites across the mountains of Lebanon. The small Corinthian temple replaced the ancient sanctuary but the cult apparently persevered.
The major shift came with a new religion. Although the relatively early Christianization of some coastal Phoenician cities like Tyre is well documented the same cannot be said of the Christianization of their hinterland. Even in cities like Sidon the religious composition of the population by the end of the 4th century AD was far more complex than might have been expected [12].

Due to the absence of any literary or epigraphic documents, the reconstruction of the process of Christianization of Sidon's hinterland relies only on careful analysis of the newly acquired archaeological data. The



1 Chhîm. Remains of the earlier sanctuary under the Roman temple dated to the mid-second century AD. (T. Waliszewski)

moment when the idea of becoming Christians gained ground among the inhabitants of the ancient settlement at Chhîm is unknown. It probably occurred around the late 5th century AD when the process of abandonment of the Roman temple continued. Except two sherds, no other fragments of the terracotta tiles from the roof of the temple were recovered during the excavations. Apparently the building was abandoned and the tiles were taken out to be reused, possibly in a house dedicated to a new Christian God.
Archaeology gives us at Chhîm an interesting insight into the process of abandonment of the ancient cult. Several architectonical elements of the temple (namely the corniche) were inserted into different parts of the Byzantine church such as the apse, presbytery, narthex. The solar bust and the figure of a priest on the façade of the temple bear traces of damage from unknown date. The transformation of the ancient sanctuary continued. Two steps of the main stairs of the temple were found during the exploration of an adjacent house. It also seems that the whole temenos of the Roman sanctuary was separated from the village by a new entrance and became the sole property of a representative of a new cult. It is interesting to note that the temple itself, after its abandonment as a cult site, became a place of commercial production. A circular basin typical of a wine press and counterweights of an oil press attest the fact that at least during the 6th century AD the temple was used for making wine and/or olive oil.



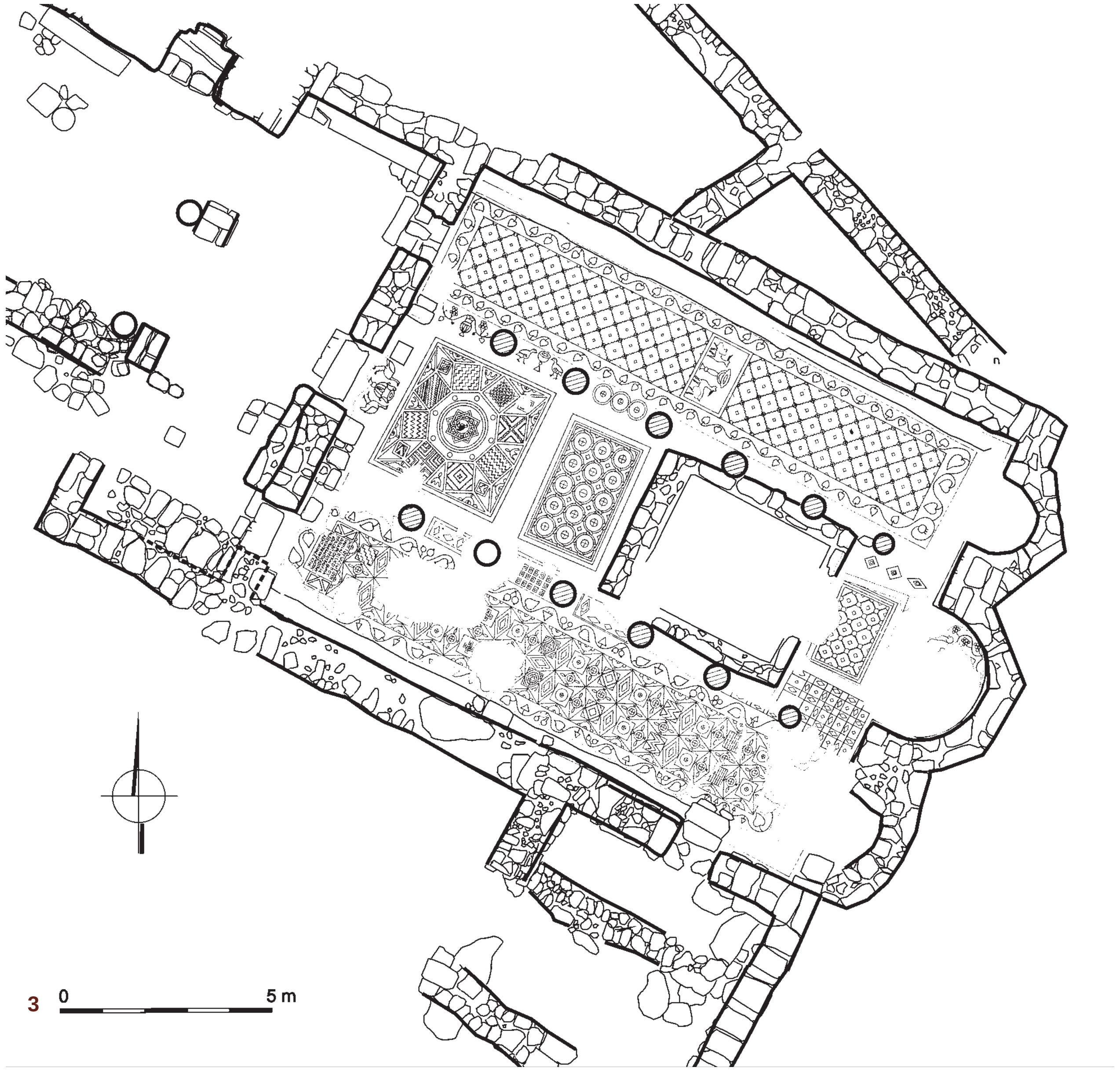
2 Chhîm. Temenos of the Roman sanctuary. (M. Puszkarski).

Presbyter Thomas builds the church

Even if the old sanctuary was deprived of its cultic function, the sacred character of the place continued well into the end of the 5th century AD. At that time the process of Christianization was so advanced or, alternatively resistance to the new religion was still significant enough that a decision was made to construct a church. The only written document related to that event was found near the entrance to the southern aisle. The Greek inscription reads: *In the time of our most holy bishop Andrew, and the presbyter Thomas, and chorepiskopos Ianos (or Aeianes), in the year 600, 6th indiction.* The newly constructed church depended on the diocese of Sidon and Andrew can be identified by his homonym, Bishop of Sidon, signatory on the documents of the synod in Tyre in 518 AD. Also, the presence of chorepiskopos (or periodeutes in Syrian realms) suggests the increasingly tight control of the newly Christianized area by the ecclesiastical authorities. The date, calculated according to the era of Sidon (111 BC) would give year 489/490 AD but the use of the fiscal year of indiction is decisive and suggests the year 498 AD as a date for the mosaics and most probably the construction of the church. The presbyter Thomas mentioned in the inscription acted as a priest of the local Christian community at the time.
Interestingly, the test trenches under the mosaics revealed a floor from the Roman period – the new building was placed in the north-eastern corner of the former temenos of the pagan sanctuary.
The church itself was a simple three-aisled basilica of modest size (18.40 x 13.10 m) with the apses protruding from the eastern wall.

The floor was entirely covered with polychrome mosaics with figural, geometric, and floral motifs. All were laid down during the first phase dated to 498 AD. Only the magnificent representation of a lioness in motion in the central part of the presbytery belongs to the later remodeling of the liturgical installations of the basilica.
More careful examination of the motifs reveals some interesting similarities with other mosaics of the region. Two antelopes (*Oryx leucoryx*) flanking the chalice in the northern aisle resemble a very similar compositions in the southern aisle of the church at Khalde Choueifat and the villa of Ouza'i[13]. Octagonal composition in the western part of the central nave finds its closest parallels in the Ghiné church situated north of Beirut and in the mosaic of the Life of Alexander in Baalbek-Soueidié but even more similarities are found in particular elements of the mosaic pavement composition in the southern aisle of the church in Zahrani and in its diaconicon as well as in the Upper Church in Khan Khalde, all of which are examples close to Chhîm in both geographical and chronological terms [14]. The

3 Chhîm. Byzantine basilica dated to 498 AD. (M. Puszkarski).




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4 Chhîm. Antelopes flanking the chalice on the panel embedded in the northern aisle of the church. (K. Kotlewski).

5 Chhîm. Octagonal composition in the western part of the central nave of the basilica. (T. Szmagier).

same can be said about the the pattern of circles laid next to the octagonal composition. There can be no doubt despite the very limited number of known examples, that during the 5th and 6th century AD there existed in the region south of Beirut, an artistic *koiné* of the mosaic workshops working for the local market. It will be a matter of new discoveries and a detailed study of existing pavements to recover one of the forgotten chapters of the late antique Phoenician heritage.

Noël Duval in an article published in 1977 and Pauline Donceel-Voûte in her 1988 book made fundamental remarks about the particularity of the liturgical organization of the churches found on the Phoenician coast [15]. The presence of a double presbytery that occupies almost 2/3 of the central nave is considered a major feature as is the later removal of one of them. The basilica from Chhîm enables us to see all the elements of the liturgical furniture as well as confirm previous observations. The phase dated to the end of the 5th century AD contained in the central nave four different areas destined for liturgical purposes: the apse for the clergy, the altar, the elevated presbytery in the form of a platform (possible place of the Liturgy of the Word) and the second presbytery namely the central part of the nave encircled by the chancel screen. During the the 6th century adaptation of the liturgical installations to new and unknown local ecclesiastical prescriptions, the westernmost presbytery was removed. The pavement in the apse, under the altar and that of the platform was levelled. The presence of an unexplained empty mosaic panel on the platform as well as traces of two tables on either side of it highlight the complexity of local liturgy. This became an issue after the discovery of the churches in Shavei Zion and Nahariya, in the southern part of the province of Phoenicia Paralia.


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6 Chhîm.
Mosaic pavement of the second presbytery. (T. Szmagier).

7 Chhîm.
Remains of the presbytery from the first phase dated to 498 AD. (K. Kotlewski).

8 Chhîm.
Remains of the presbytery from the second phase dated to the 6th century AD. (K. Kotlewski).

This brief summary on the recent research on the Chhîm basilica leads to at least three assertions. In contrast with neighbouring countries, the study of Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture in Lebanon is still at a very early stage. Also, research on Lebanese churches was carried out by examining the monuments exposed during the last twenty years or so in the northern part of Palestine, but especially in Galilee and the most southern part of the province of Phoenicia Paralia. Finally, the proper interpretation of the archaeological remains would certainly contribute to the better understanding of the Byzantine liturgy in the Levantine churches in the 5th-7th centuries AD. These observations raise the subject of the Christianization of the Near East. The well-known episode of the monk Abraames struggling in the beginning of the 5th century AD for the conversion of the rural population of one of the villages on the slopes of the Beqa'a and described by Theodoret of Cyrus (*Hist. Phil.* 17.3) encourages us to ask whether the process of Christianization of the coastal part of Phoenicia was similarly slow.



9 Chhîm. General view of the basilica with the remains of the latest liturgical organization. (K. Kotlewski).

NOTES

1 I dedicate this text to the memory of Renata Ortali Tarazi, an archaeologist of the Directorate General of Antiquities and the co-director of the excavations at Chhîm. The church and its mosaics were the constant source of her pride and concern. Unfortunately, she passed away before the final phase of the project was accomplished.

2 G. Downey, 1962, "Constantine's Churches at Antioch, Tyre and Jerusalem (Notes on Architectural Terms)", *Mélanges de l'Université de Saint-Joseph,* 38, p. 191-196.

3 Y. Tsafrir, L. di Segni, J. Green eds., 1993, *Tabula Imperii Romani: Iudaea-Palestina. Israel in the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Periods. Maps and Gazetteer*, Jerusalem, map 4; A. Michel, 2001, *Les églises d'époque byzantine et umayyade de Jordanie (provinces d'Arabie et de Palestine) V^{e}-VIII^{e} siècle. Typologie architecturale et aménagements liturgiques*, Turnhout

4 From the south to the north: Majdal Zoun, Qabr Hiram, Tyre, Zahrani, Nebi Younis, Jiyeh, 'Anane, Chhîm, 'Ain es-Samaké, two churches in Khan Khalde, Khalde Choueifat, Beit Mery, Ghine, Yanuh; I do not take into consideration some more or less doubtful examples of churches installed in Roman temples such as e.g. Faqra).

5 E. Renan, *Mission de Phénicie*, 1864, Paris, p. 627-628 and pl. XLIX.

6 M. Chéhab, 1958-1959, "Mosaïques du Liban", *Bulletin du Musée de Beyrouth,* p. 14-15 (hereafter Chéhab 1958-1959).

7 N. Duval and J.-P. Caillet, 1982, "Khan Khaldé (ou Khaldé III). Les fouilles de Roger Saidah dans les églises, mises en œuvre d'après les documents de l'auteur", in: *Archéologie au Levant. Recueil R. Saidah*, CMO 12, Arch. 9, Lyon, p. 311-394 (hereafter Duval-Caillet 1982).

8 P. Donceel-Voûte, 1998, *Les pavements des églises byzantines de Syrie et du Liban. Décor, archéologie et liturgie*, Louvain-la-Neuve.

9 T. Waliszewski and F. Alpi, 1997, "Église byzantine à Majdal Zoun (Liban Sud)", *Bulletin d'Archéologie et d'Architecture Libanaises,* 2, p. 290-306; F. Alpi, S. Kowalski and T. Waliszewski, 1998, "Une église byzantine découverte à Anane (Liban Sud)", *Syria,* 75 p. 231-243; T. Waliszewski, R. Ortali Tarazi *et al.*, 2002, "Village romain et byzantin à Chhim-Marjiyat. Rapport preliminaire (1996-2002)", *Bulletin d'Archeologie et d'Architecture Libanaises,* 6, p. 5-105.

10 The excavations started in 1996 as a joint project of the Lebanese Directorate General of Antiquities and the Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw in collaboration with the Institut Français du Proche-Orient. I express my deepest gratitude to their respective directors and especially to Frédéric Husseini, Michal Gawlikowski and Bertrand Lafont for their unfailing support.

11 T. Waliszewski, R. Ortali Tarazi *et al.*, 2002, "Village romain et byzantin à Chhim-Marjiyat. Rapport préliminaire (1996-2002)", *Bulletin d'Archéologie et d'Architecture Libanaises*, 6, p. 5-105.

12 Two examples should be mentioned: the Mithraeum dated to 389 AD, E. Will, 1950, "La date du Mithreum de Sidon", *Syria,* 27, p. 261-269 and the chapel of Hygieia build during the 4th century AD in the Eshmun sanctuary at Bostan ech-Cheikh.

13 M. Dunand, 1958-1959, "Rapport préliminaire sur les fouilles de Sidon" *Bulletin du Musée de Beyrouth,* XIX, p. 105; Chéhab 1958-1959, pls. LXXIV and LXXXIV.

14 Chéhab 1958-1959, pls. pl. XCVIII.1 (Ghiné), XXII-XXIII (Baalbek-Soueidié), XLVI-II, LIII (Zahrani), Duval-Caillet 1982, fig, 36, 46b (Khan Khalde).

15 N. Duval, 1977, "Note sur l'église de Kabr Hiram et ses installations liturgiques", *Cahiers Archéologiques*, 26, p. 81-104; P. Donceel-Voûte, 1998, *Les pavements des églises byzantines de Syrie et du Liban. Décor, archéologie et liturgie,* Louvain-la-Neuve.